



Frederick Engels

Man made by labour

Human beings create themselves

As well as being short, the attached essay of Engels' ("The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man") is very easy to read and to understand. Yet it explains a lot that is hardly covered by the conventional education of a "Western" bourgeois or bourgeois-dominated person.

What is there to disagree with in it? Very little. But some. Engels used his Germanic language in the manner of his time. So it becomes "Man", even if what is meant is "Woman and Man".

Man, or Woman the Creator?

Evelyn Reed added to Engels' understanding, by pointing out (in "Women's Evolution") that it was women who invented and perfected the technologies upon which we continue to rely today. The increase of wealth occasioned by the technological advances made by women brought pre-historic humans to the brink of history.

The pre-history of society, according to Engels, is "social organisation existing previous to recorded history", while recorded history is also and inevitably "the history of class struggles". These quotations are from the Communist Manifesto, Bourgeois and Proletarians, first line, and Engels' footnote to it. Engels wrote more extensively about history and pre-history in "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State".

At the dawn of history, several things happened at the same time. Property, the state, class struggle, the oppression of women, and writing, all came about at once. The new system of class division required all of these things, and we will, in the next part, see that it required schooling (i.e. an institutionalised and professional education system), as well.

"The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man" proceeds to mention capitalism, before it breaks off.

Engels returned to the question of pre-historic human development, and the historical development of class

struggle, seven years later after the death of his friend Karl Marx. In Marx's papers, Engels found work, based partly on studies by the US writer Henry Morgan, and composed these into the full book called "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State".

Not only Marx and Engels, but also one of the great founders of philosophy, Baruch de Spinoza, wrote about the self-development of human beings through learning. In the following widely-quoted passage, Spinoza wrote:

As far as the 'method for finding out the truth' is concerned, 'the matter stands on the same footing as the making of material tools.... For, in order to work iron, a hammer is needed, and the hammer cannot be forthcoming unless it has been made; but, in order to make it, there was need of another hammer and other tools, and so on to infinity. We might thus vainly endeavour to prove that men have no power of working iron.

'But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labour and greater perfection. . . . So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh

instruments, or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceeds till it reaches the summit of wisdom.'

**B. de Spinoza (1632-1677),
Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and
Correspondence**

We can usefully note here that Lev Vygotsky was familiar with all of these writings (i.e. those of Engels and those of Spinoza).

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Engels, The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man, 1876.](#)
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here.](#)